

“What Do You Bring to the Journey?”
A, Pentecost 13 ; 10:00 am
Romans 12:1-21; September 3, 2017
Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO
Rev. Rebecca K. Poos

Place Your Life Before God

(Romans 12:1-21, The Message translation)

12 ¹⁻² So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.

³ I'm speaking to you out of deep gratitude for all that God has given me, and especially as I have responsibilities in relation to you. Living then, as every one of you does, in pure grace, it's important that you not misinterpret yourselves as people who are bringing

this goodness to God. No, God brings it all to you. The only accurate way to understand ourselves is by what God is and by what he does for us, not by what we are and what we do for him.

⁴⁻⁶ In this way we are like the various parts of a human body. Each part gets its meaning from the body as a whole, not the other way around. The body we're talking about is Christ's body of chosen people. Each of us finds our meaning and function as a part of his body. But as a chopped-off finger or cut-off toe we wouldn't amount to much, would we? So since we find ourselves fashioned into all these excellently formed and marvelously functioning parts in Christ's body, let's just go ahead and be what we were made to be, without enviously or pridefully comparing ourselves with each other, or trying to be something we aren't.

⁶⁻⁸ If you preach, just preach God's Message, nothing else; if you help, just help, don't take over; if you teach, stick to your teaching; if you give encouraging guidance, be careful that you don't get bossy; if you're put in charge, don't manipulate; if you're called to give aid to people in distress, keep your eyes open and be quick to respond; if you work with the disadvantaged,

don't let yourself get irritated with them or depressed by them. Keep a smile on your face.

⁹⁻¹⁰ Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle.

¹¹⁻¹³ Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant. Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder. Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality.

¹⁴⁻¹⁶ Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath. Laugh with your happy friends when they're happy; share tears when they're down. Get along with each other; don't be stuck-up. Make friends with nobodies; don't be the great somebody.

¹⁷⁻¹⁹ Don't hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you've got it in you, get along with everybody. Don't insist on getting even; that's not for you to do. "I'll do the judging," says God. "I'll take care of it."

²⁰⁻²¹ Our Scriptures tell us that if you see your enemy hungry, go buy that person lunch, or if he's thirsty, get him a drink. Your generosity will surprise him with

goodness. Don't let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good.

I. HOW TO LIVE THE LIFE OF FAITH

There ya have it!

All in 21 verses, from the twelfth chapter of Paul's Letter to the Romans. *Everything* you need to know for living the Christian life—living out the Gospel of Christ; *being* the Body of Christ—whether on Labor Day weekend or *any* weekend, on a Communion Sunday when we gather around the Table, or *any* Sunday in the year, or *any* day in between!

It's all there, really. If you ever wonder about what the secrets are to how to get along in community; what the By-laws for living as a Christian say, what we are *called* to as people of faith—it's not hidden or far out of reach. Pick up your Bible!! Let's see: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, (remember what you learned in 3rd Grade Sunday School with Mrs. Dawes).....Acts....Romans!

Oh, Romans! There we are!

And read Chapter 12. And read it again, in a different translation. This Message translation that Laurie read this morning is outstanding. Especially for *this* passage.

II. JOURNEY INTO FALL

Today, we begin a new season. You might be thinking, wait! Did I miss a liturgical change? Is it Advent or Lent or something, and I wasn't paying attention?! Was I supposed to change some paraments or banners or wear a different color stole?!

No! It's not *official* or liturgical or particularly related to the Calendar kind of seasonal change. Chronos or Kairos time either one. But it is a change of season in our life together as church; as the Beloved Community we are in this congregation.

This is the liturgical season of "Round Up" in the life of the church. We are coming back together after a summer of travel and Mission trips and reunions and endless batches of company. School has started and children and adults alike are "back at it."

Sunday School and choir and Adult Education all start next week, Women's Missionary meets again this month, backpacks and are ramping up, countless community gatherings and chili-cookoffs and more life than we can keep track of will soon bring us together as the Family of God in countless ways.

And, and we kick-off all that in our new "year" with Round Up Sunday next Sunday, Sept. 10th. (Don't forget your cowboy and cowgirl duds!)

In this Roundup Season at CUCC, we are going to take a "Journey" together. Our theme for the entire Fall will be Journey—a spiritual, communal, adventure. A Pilgrimage of sorts. A Journey of Faith into our future as a congregation.

And today, as we begin our new season of "Journey in the Faith" we're going to unpack this passage from Paul—*just a bit!* But, I bring you good news! We're not going to unpack all twenty-one verses!

Though, I can assure you that this rich goldmine will be revisited again this Fall before our Journey series is through! And, *more* good news for you, if you act before midnight tonight! (Just kidding.)

If you make sure to be here that Sunday or Sundays, or even at a Council meeting or Leadership Retreat when it might appear again, and we delve-in even further. And you tell me that you remembered talking about it **today**, there will be a *prize* for you for excellent attendance and paying attention!! It might be chocolate in my office, or an extra piece of Doyle cake, or.....you'll have to *be* here to find out!

III. RESPOND TO THE CULTURE AROUND

And so, let's unpack a bit. And, like opening a suitcase after a long trip and pulling out the mix of

stuff, we're going to unpack *in no particular order*, but just grab onto whatever comes out first.

Okay, here's an item to start:

"Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. **You'll be changed from the inside out.** Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to *its* level of immaturity, God brings the *best* out of you, develops well-formed maturity *in* you."

The first step in starting out on a journey—spiritual or any kind, is to look at your surroundings. What is happening in your context? How has your culture pulled you in so that you're acting on auto-pilot?

Where do you need to step back and take a broader look, challenge the status quo, look and listen for what God wants you to do and say *to* that culture? Even be counter-culture and not "swept in" and actually *too* well-adjusted?

Our culture these days is giving us much to respond to. A couple weeks ago we struggled with how we love our neighbor seriously and fully when some neighbors are harming other neighbors. Are we called to love all equally? Or, to stand up for those not being treated lovingly? Or?

We struggled with Jesus' commands:

"Love your neighbor as yourself. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

And reminded ourselves: Love does *not* mean: accept the unacceptable, allow evil to prosper or hate to win the day. But, that as Christians, when so many of our neighbors are in danger, living in fear for their very lives, and have no one to stand up for and with them, then if we follow Jesus, we have no choice but to speak a resounding NO! to that spirit and fear."

Jesus *didn't* say to "love that which is evil." And the enemy is *us*, too, when we are silent, indifferent or blind to *our* complicity in systemic evil.

And, we committed ourselves, and do so again today: when the culture around us tries to drag us down to its level of immaturity, to keep our focus on God to bring out the best in us—all of us!

Loving our neighbors, *or* our enemies, when they don't love each *other*, calls for even greater response and deeper dedication to prayer for guidance. The tougher it gets, the more we need to be on our knees!

IV. CHANGE FROM THE INSIDE OUT

So, when you respond to that culture, not letting it drag you down, what happens? When you "seek first the kingdom of God and its righteousness?"

"Instead, fix your attention on God, says Paul. "You'll be changed from the inside out."

Changed from the inside out. Pretty profound. What does that *look* like, when God gets ahold of us—as individuals and community alike, and *changes* us from the inside out? I think we need more than a season-- from Labor Day till Advent—to figure that one out!

V. NO LABELS OR CATEGORIES

The first step we must take in “being changed from the inside out” in *this* community is to resist the urge to label one another. To “put people in categories”; or make assumptions “that they must be this and that or believe such and such. Just say no to labeling!! Your brothers and sisters in Christ, and anyone you meet, for that matter.

Arlene Waldorf, our Moderator says it eloquently in this month’s newsletter article—a must read:

“Labels, Labels, Labels” —CUCC NEWSLETTER, for September (arriving in your mailboxes this week!)

I like to dream that we are all God-seekers, faithful in caring about the welfare of everyone, independent in our thinking regarding politics, ready to stand against all that harms ourselves and others. We come from many backgrounds and shouldn’t be labeled as hot-headed Irish, stubborn Dutch, ghetto African American, mafioso Italian....

We are so much more than that. Every person deserves to be known for who his/her complicated self

is. Everyone deserves to feel safe from labels and safe from harm. May God’s love overwhelm us and give us courage to look deeply into one another’s soul and avoid inadequate, harmful labels. We are all worthy of so much more!

VI. BE WHO WE WERE MADE TO BE

And then! When we stop trying to label one another, or put each other or our congregation into a “category,” what happens?

Paul says:

“So since we find ourselves fashioned into all these excellently formed and marvelously functioning parts in Christ’s body, let’s just go ahead and be what we were made to be, without enviously or pridefully comparing ourselves with each other, or trying to be something we aren’t.”

Angela Blanchard is a community organizer –in Houston, of all places. She works there –long before anyone had heard of Harvey—with refugees and anyone who find themselves suddenly “shipwrecked.”

She learned in working with folks after Katrina that the important question, as displaced people landed in shelters and rescue centers, isn’t “what do you need?” But, “what do you have?” What do you bring with you, besides the shirt on your back and maybe shoes on your feet? What skills, knowledge, abilities do you

have that can be pooled with what others bring? What can we do, if we all pool our gifts and strengths together, even in these most desperate times? Isn't that a spell-binding echo of the Loaves and Fishes moment?

Angela Blanchard found then, and since then in all kinds of work in natural and human-caused disasters of many types, that the human spirit is *amazing* in its resiliency to find a way through crisis: IF those spirits bind together and share their gifts and strengths and build on each other, rather than either tearing each other down or struggling along as isolated ships.

How easy it is, in our life together, to focus on what we don't have. How the budget is below the line in a big way; how we don't have very many younger folks; how we have "lost ground" in terms of people serving and able to fully participate in the life of the church.

What if, like the disaster response teams, instead of asking ourselves and each other at such a time as this: "What do you *need*?" Or, "what are you lacking or wishing for?" We asked, ourselves and each person around us: "What do you bring?" "What do you have?" What gifts, resources tangible and non, do you bring to the table? What skills and knowledge and passion can you share, and pool together with those around you?

We could change the world, or at least this place right here, by changing that ONE question we ask.

VII. LINKING ARMS

UCC Pastor **Quinn Caldwell**, in a reflection called "Super Human," tells an unforgettable story:

Psalm 124:"... the flood would have swept us away, the torrent would have gone over us; then over us would have gone the raging waters." –

Earlier this summer, two women visiting Panama City Beach in Florida heard screams and saw two young boys hundreds of feet out from shore. They'd been caught in a rip current and couldn't get back.

There being no lifeguards on duty, the women went out on boogie boards to try to save them, and got stuck themselves. Multiple other rescue attempts failed, until there were **nine** people caught in the water and in danger of drowning.

That's when the people on the beach realized that **no single person** was going to be able to save them. This was a problem that was bigger than *any* one swimmer, even a strong one, could handle.

So one by one, then ten by ten by ten, they **linked arms**, forming a human chain reaching out toward the stranded swimmers. And having made their human bodies into one huge super-human body, they plucked those swimmers from the waters and passed them back to shore. Not one person died that day on Panama City Beach.

There are problems in this world that a body cannot handle alone. There are situations that cannot be saved by a single person. There are currents you can never swim your own way out of. Which is why (please tell me you saw this coming) God gave us the church, the place where we link ourselves up, make our bodies into **The Body**, and perform miracles that none of us could perform alone.

The church doesn't exist for *your* salvation; it exists to give *you* a way to participate in the saving of the world.

Prayer

God, for the strong arms of the one to my left and to my right, and for superhuman strength you give us when we're together, thank you.

VIII. LOVE IS STILL THE WAY!!

And finally, Paul doesn't let us off the hook in this passage and throws that business about loving our enemies in at the last two verses:

²⁰⁻²¹ Our Scriptures tell us that if you see your enemy hungry, go buy that person lunch, or if he's thirsty, get him a drink. Your generosity will surprise him with goodness. Don't let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good.

Today, as we prayerfully dedicate our new banner—proclaiming “Love is **STILL** the way,” we do *just* what Paul urges all followers of Christ to do. In Rome, in Ephesus, in Galatia, in Corinth, in America, in Europe, in Buena Vista—you name it!

“Don't let evil get the best of you.” “Render to no one evil for evil, but render evil for good.” Love *must* be our message—our *only* message if we call ourselves Christ's church.

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and strength, and Love your neighbor as yourself.” There are no other marching orders, no mission statement, no By-laws for the Body of Christ, than to love, period. And to hold up Love as a marching order when hate tries to rule the day.

IX. TAKE OUR LIVES, LORD, LET THEM BE

“Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering.”

Let us pray as we come to the Table:

God, we place our everyday, ordinary life as a congregation—our gathering, worshiping, eating and communing around the Table. Our working, serving, reaching out, praying, connecting, caring and supporting one another and our neighbors in community. We bring our stretching, growing, learning and sowing seeds together. We link arms and help and hold one another up as we walk each other home. We bring our entire journey as “Christ's body of chosen people” in this time and place before you, Great Spirit of God, as an offering.

We will go where you go, and love whom you love.
Trusting, following your lead.

Take our lives and let them be, consecrated Lord, to
Thee. Amen.